

Internal Memorandum

TO: Roger Crofts FROM: Ron Macdonald
CC: Ian Jardine
DATE: 23 October 1997 FILE REF: EG/26/NTS/MLMC
SUBJECT: Briefing on Mar Lodge Estate

As requested for your NTS Council meeting on Friday, I set out below a brief report on the management of Mar Lodge Estate by the Trust.

As you know the first 5 year management plan was approved by Council in March of this year and contains almost 40 specific objectives which relate to the key objectives of management. The principal and overriding aim is to manage the land in a sustainable manner, ensuring the conservation and restoration of its internationally important geology/geomorphology, flora, fauna, wild land quality and archaeological value. Underpinning this primary aim are a series of broad principles and more specific prescriptions and targets which seek to manage the various assets of the estate, e.g., restore woodlands, maintain recreational access, maintain traditional sporting activities, provide for environmental education and interpretation etc .

Progress to date has been very good and I list some notable achievements.

1. To enable the native Scots Pinewoods to regenerate without the use of fencing, the target is to reduce the red deer population by half over 5 years with the majority of the reduction to be achieved by the end of year 3 (ie next year). This requires a high and sustained culling effort which is proceeding to plan and there are already encouraging signs of improvements in the condition of heather moorland and small scale regeneration of Scots Pine within and adjacent to the Quoich.

2. Major progress has been made on restructuring some 700 hectares of plantations to minimise the adverse impacts on landscape, watercourses and access. Most of these have had their fences removed to provide shelter for deer and to eliminate bird strikes by black game. In turn the provision of shelter for deer has reduced pressure on the more vulnerable native woodland remnants. Further restructuring of plantations and early removal of deer fences is planned for in 1998.

Based on a specially commissioned woodland management plan, the Trust has recently submitted an ambitious WGS 3 application for almost 8000 hectares of natural regeneration of native woodland in the catchment of the river Quoich, to be achieved without fencing. An ES has been produced and is currently with FA .

3 Footpath repair work has commenced on sections of the Lairig Ghru and Coire Etchachan footpaths and work on the first phase of the Beinn a' Bhuidr hill track restoration commenced this summer.

4. A biological monitoring strategy has been developed and is now largely in place. This concentrates on linking management changes with changes in the natural heritage and has been designed to be used by estate personnel rather than by specialists.

5. A landscape character assessment has been completed for the whole estate, the majority at 1:25000 scale but some at 1:12500 scale. This will be a powerful tool in strategic and local planning on the estate, especially when used in conjunction with woodland expansion plans, hilltrack restoration etc. To assist management planning it is planned to establish a GIS system on the estate in 1998. Photographic monitoring of landscape change is also underway.

6. People and vehicle counters have been installed as the first stage of a visitor management plan.

7. Local and wider consultation over management of the estate has been very good and workshops have been convened to discuss the Management Plan and other policy changes.

Policy and key management decisions are considered by the Mar Lodge Management Advisory Committee on which I sit along with Professor Gimmingham, Bob Reid and Toby Tennant as chair. To date it has worked very effectively although its role is advisory to the CNCC committee and strictly speaking it has no executive authority. In addition it has at times fallen foul of other NTS committees such as the Buildings committee, most often when the priorities for the management of Mar Lodge estate appear to run counter to corporate NTS policies or the primary remit of other committees. Of late these problems have increased and I think there is a need for more clarity over roles and responsibilities in decision making for Mar Lodge estate.

A case in point is the inordinate concentration on buildings issues, especially as most of the time they are not central to the primary aim of managing the estate or indeed its acquisition. In addition the costs of repairs to buildings seem to be inordinately high due to a tendency of the Trust to repair to the highest specifications, irrespective of the archaeological value or functional use of the building. Although to date it cannot be said that this has resulted in funding being diverted from wider estate management, it has taken up considerable staff time which could be better spent on managing the wider estate.

One a more positive note is the conversion of part of Mar Lodge into 4 self catering flats (possibly another 3 to added depending on availability of funds). Currently the Lodge costs some £50k annually to maintain (heating costs mostly) and the NHMF endowment calculation was based on the lodge at least "washing its own face" and not being a financial drain on the wider estate. The contract for the conversion commenced in early September with an opening scheduled for Easter 1998. Prices are extremely attractive for this STB 3/4 crown/star property so book early to avoid disappointment!

The one issue which is of ongoing concern to SNH is the use of mountain bikes on the estate. As you know, as part of the acquisition, it was a condition of the Easter/Anonymous Trust funding that NTS "...make continuous and constant effort to dissuade, and where possible to prohibit, the use of mechanical or wheeled vehicles and all mechanical recreational activities beyond the immediate environs of the mansion house known as Mar Lodge"

To be fair to NTS, they privately acknowledge that there is probably a legal right of way for cyclists across the mountain passes such as at the Lairig Ghru but in the management

plan they do not accept that the use of mountain bikes is a bona fide and sustainable activity on the estate. Furthermore, NTS claim that the use of bikes undermines the concept of wild land and damages vegetation and soils. However, realising they are on a sticky wicket, both morally and legally, they hope to implement the no biking policy by dissuasion rather a blanket ban which would be impossible to enforce and cause a major conflict. This will involve the use of interpretative signs specifically aimed at getting cyclists not to use their bikes on the wider estate.

SNH's advice to NTS is that rather than saying that the general use of mountain bikes is unsustainable, they should concentrate efforts on the responsible use of bikes on the wider estate. However, such a pragmatic approach is unacceptable to the Easter/Anonymous Trust who through George Russell continue to insist the NTS take a much harder line on the cycling issue. To date both SNH and NHMF have shown understanding to NTS' predicament but this may not be maintained if the Anonymous Trust continue to make unreasonable demands which cannot be fulfilled and which are contrary to our support of responsible enjoyment of the countryside.

To summarise, NTS are to be congratulated on a such a good start to their management of Mar Lodge. The acquisition of a new property of this size presents a major challenge to an organisation which to date has a chequered history in land use management. The relatively few problems that do occur will be quickly overcome if there is better clarity over roles and responsibilities in the management of the estate, both internally and in dealings with the Easter/Anonymous Trust.